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### Abstract

Argues that the need for imaginative expression, if not directed toward the “intentional and moral” fantasy typified by the Inklings, can lead to an unhealthy interest in (and practice of) occultism.

### Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Moral and religious aspects; Fantasy—Psychological aspects; Fantasy and the occult; Fantasy literature—Moral and religious aspects; Fantasy literature—Psychological aspects; Occult and fantasy

# THE GREAT BEAST

## Imagination in Harness

by Galen Peoples

"Mad?... You don't go mad this way... I've got something that doesn't go mad... But I want the ointment." — Charles Williams, *War in Heaven*.

The difficulty of justifying a taste for fantasy - apart from the equivocal, "To each his own," and the next-to-hopeless protestation, "But really, it's good; you ought to try it some time" - is my first motivation for writing this essay. My second, more immediate motive is the mass of daily-accumulating detail concerning the recent ghastly Tate/Manson murders, and the strongly occult milieu which apparently spawned them.

One Los Angeles newspaper recently carried a story from Santa Cruz, California, which affirms the supposition that many young people are engaging in witchcraft. (This essay will not admit to the possibility of a functional witchcraft.) Even if the article was untrue, evidence from other sources seems to substantiate the existence of witchcraft here, today. As one worker at a narcotics-rehabilitation center noted, superstition is the natural companion/successor to drug-taking.

The psychological craving that might lead a young person to join a "coven" - at least to the same degree of likelihood as the other possible explanations (lust for power or "anti-establishment" sentiment) - is the need for an imaginative outlet, manifested in its darkest, most perverse form. Thus on this level, the "coven" is an antithesis, less to church orthodoxy than to (don't laugh yet) such organizations as The Tolkien Society and The Mythopoeic Society.

According to the newspaper article, in the Santa Cruz area, a number of dogs have been found skinned, with the blood drained from them. Fire-dances and blood-drinking have been reported; LSD has been introduced into the sacramental wine in order to convince prospective converts of their own supernatural faculties. Young people are convinced that they have been "hexed." Of course, all this is nonsense, from either of the two possible viewpoints: (a) atheist-pragmatic, or (b) theological: (a) if there is no God, there is no Satan; (b) if there is a God, He is by definition superior to any Satan.

However, faith in witchcraft depend not on rational thought-processes, but on the *a priori* assumption, "It works." This, in turn, can be (and reportedly is) induced by narcotics, by a form of mass hysteria, and foremost, by the incalculable power of the unharnessed imagination, which is acted upon by - and, in turn, abets - the other stimuli. But, even granting this, I think it is safe to suggest that such a faith in witchcraft requires that one want to believe, consciously or sub-consciously; that this want is a psychological craving for "the myth come true," of which Tolkien speaks: "the word made flesh": the black fantasy suddenly become real. The occultist desires to credit what is literally incredible; thus, the dichotomy of the Judeo-Christian faith and witchcraft.

I think it is probable that a good number of Mythopoeic Society members, and an even larger percentage of fans in general, were once (or are still) interested in occultism. It would be odd if none was: both areas of interest rely upon a similar appeal to the imagination. Indeed, one of the chapter-headings for Richard Cavendish's fine study *The Black Arts* (Capricorn, 1968) is taken from *The Lord of The Rings*. Williams, who authored a historical-theological study of witchcraft (*Witchcraft*, Meridian Books, 1959), was once a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn.

Among the readers of occult literature, one can distinguish at least two levels of mentality, whose reactions to the veracity of the material - "the myth come true" - are exactly opposite:

(1) The Non-Philosophical, *e.g.*, the reader who devours avidly all occult/science fiction/fantasy products from comic books to astrological charts. The possibility that such fantasies may be true only increases his vicarious pleasure. Never would he participate in a blood-feast or a living sacrifice (and if he did, he would certainly be incapable of comprehending its implications); his belief in supernatural *machinae* is more on the level of the hoax-theology Scientology, "Bridey Murphy," or Argosy's monthly revelation (The Bermuda Triangle! The Missing Link! The Loch Ness Monster!).

(2) The Philosophical, *e.g.*, the reader who enjoys the fiction, but realizes that the fun must cease when the fantasy becomes reality. In the involuted psychological complexities of the occultist, he may recognize his own dark capacity for the perverse. "The fun must cease": this dictates not only that he abandon his fantasy where necessary to avoid succumbing to an undesirable view of life (*i.e.*, the immoral), but also that he clear it aside where necessary to make way for the comparatively desirable view (*e.g.*, Tolkien's). Nor is this necessarily a conscious process. Let me illustrate.

The precise distinction between "literature" (or "art") and non-literature (or non art) is the degree to which reality is reflected, whether depicted or symbolized. Two contrasting examples are *The Lord of The Rings* and Robert E. Howard's "Conan the Conqueror" series. To a point, Howard is enjoyable to read: his stories are actionful and exotic - and how they connect with even the most rudimentary realities. Tolkien, however, leads us into the fields of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Germanic, and Celtic myth; (purportedly) intentional political symbology; and particularly into Christian theology - all of which Howard is incapable of doing. One may readily read *The Lord of The Rings* after "Conan"; who would want to read "Conan" after *The Lord of The Rings* - at least, until one's remembrance of the latter was somewhat dimmed?

As Donald L. Reinken has stated, in an article re-printed in *Tolkien Journal* (Afterlithe, 1986): "Whosoever truly journeys with Frodo... cannot say in his heart, 'There is no God.'" The fantasy-cosmos of Middle-Earth leads us to the moral reality of religion: "the myth come true." Howard's work is thus inferior, not because his style is atrocious, his plots interchangeable, and his characters one-dimensional - all of which are true - but because we have exceeded his grasp. We have been led by Tolkien to a point at which the fantasy impinges on our own world - much like Lord Dunsany's characters who, "gazing over their familiar lands, perceived that they were no longer the fields we know." (This might be called the reverse-process.)

As far as we have proceeded, Tolkien's view - hence his "secondary world," as he terms it - is essentially desirable. (As each of us progresses further into his chosen sphere - religion, politics, economics - and refines his personal predilections, it may well become increasingly less desirable.) Howard's world brought to life would be unbearable. And similarly - to return to our starting-point - as soon as we become aware that there exist real witches who drink human blood, our enjoyment in occult literature (hopefully) diminishes.

Here, I believe, is where such authors as Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams - and such organizations as The Tolkien Society and The Mythopoeic Society - become necessary, as alternative and preferable outlets for the imagination.

Some observers (Edmund Wilson, for example) have questioned whether fantasy has any value; some genuinely consider it unhealthy. One is tempted to assign them to the First Circle of Hell, in which Dante placed the ancient Greeks whose imaginations did not aim high enough. But that would be an over-simplification: these critics



do not attack all aspects of the imaginations, only its most blatantly symbolical manifestations. They may even praise the more obviously utilitarian examples of the same property: advertising design, architecture, and space technology.

Of these, fantasy is the philosophical counterpart. Like them, it reflects man's condition and demonstrates his capabilities. As an example, Shakespeare's Caliban does not merely frighten or disgust us (we may, withal, pity him); he represents the ultimate potential ugliness of man - and Ariel, man's ultimate potential beauty. A similarly dichotomous, although more pessimistic, example is H.G. Wells' Morlocks and Eloi ("Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"). Fantasy moves us, accosts us, warns us, inspires us - not statistically or syllogistically, but in images - naturally so, as it is the purest form of imagination.

I feel it is imperative that we recognize the appeal of this imagination, and consciously expend it on intentional, and moral, fantasy. Otherwise, the fantasies which beckon to us may be disguised. Witchcraft is not the only instance of the onslaught of imagination when little expected. Witness the Salem witch trials; the Spanish Inquisition; the horrors of Dachau and Belzen; the McCarthy years; all war propaganda; and, in certain quarters, contemporary anti-war propaganda. In all cases, a select set - witches; heretics; Jews; Communists; "the enemy"; the so-called stooges of the "military-industrial complex" - become Calibans: mythical bogeys. In all cases, substantial horrors, usually conceived and gestated in the mind, grow uncontrollable, become the reality behind the fantasy has become inseparable from it. And in most cases, the affected parties tend to be paupers of the imagination, members of a society that hold it suspect.

An exception is the Nazis. Here, like a black apocalyptic vision, we see the attempted fulfillment of "the myth come true" - the superiority of the Aryan race. "Rising on the wings of their own terrific dream," to abuse Williams' metaphor from The Greater Trumps, they are soon incapable of distinguishing their high-flown fantasy from the ghastly reality.

The unharnessed imagination may be likened to the beast-archetypes of The Place of The Lion: phenomenal power evoked without controlling intelligence. Such groups as The Mythopoeic Society and the authors whom they represent, harness this power to a proper yoke. Readers of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams can be made conscious of the potency of the imagination and, further, of the realities beyond any imaginative projection. And by viewing reality through fantasy, one through the other, they can be made aware that the two are separable: the symbolic and the actual.

As the angel of George MacDonald advises Lewis, in the final chapter of The Great Divorce:

And if ye come to tell of what ye have seen, make it plain that it was but a dream.... Give no poor fool the pretext to think ye are claiming knowledge of what no mortal knows....  
"God forbid, Sir," said I, trying to look very wise.  
"He has forbidden it. That's what I'm telling ye."

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